

[Review] Nell Gabiam (2016) The politics of suffering: Syria's Palestinian refugee camps

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The Politics of Suffering: Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps, by Nell Gabiam. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. 191 pages. \$85.00 cloth, \$29.00 e-book.

REVIEWED BY ANNE IRFAN

As the Syrian conflict shows no sign of resolution, interest in the country's Palestinian population has rarely been higher. Anthropologist Nell Gabiam's first monograph provides an ethnographic study of three Palestinian camps in Syria—Yarmouk, Ein el Tal, and Neirab—in the immediate pre-war period. Following two years of fieldwork and voluntary work in these camps, she uses UNRWA's Neirab Rehabilitation Project as a case study for evaluating how international development is tied to refugee politics. Running from 2000 until the Syrian war halted it in 2012, this project was driven by UNRWA's shift from relief to development. UNRWA used the project to test the feasibility of sustainable development in Palestinian camps, by relocating refugees from crumbling 1940s barracks in Neirab to brand new housing in Ein el Tal.

While Gabiam's evaluation of development has broad significance, her analysis remains firmly grounded in the Palestinian context. She takes as her starting point the loaded nature of the very idea of development for Palestinian refugees anxious about permanent resettlement. The Neirab Rehabilitation Project is an ideal case study in this regard, as the refugees' concerns about its long-term implications make the project emblematic of the camps' political symbolism. If living in a camp symbolizes belief in the right of return, projects designed to relocate refugees permanently can be seen as encouraging the abandonment of this ideal.

Gabiam's nuanced study of Syria's Palestinian community is an engaging and informative read, highlighting the variations between Neirab and Ein el Tal. Her ethnographic research methodology enables her to interweave broader analysis with personal anecdotes and accounts. This adds depth and distinction to what might otherwise be a dry study of development politics. However, the study of Yarmouk – included as an example of a Palestinian camp that has undergone successful urban development – feels detached and could be better integrated into the rest of the text.

While *The Politics of Suffering* makes few groundbreaking new arguments, its contributions to the field come in other forms. Most importantly, Gabiam devises a new analytical framework around the “politics of suffering” and the “politics of citizenship.” The former denotes “the ways in which suffering becomes a means—whether deliberately or not—of attaining political legitimacy and rights” (p. 9). She observes that the Palestinian refugees tend to adhere to this, persistently rejecting the standard humanitarian presentation of their plight as detached from politics. Meanwhile the Western-backed international community largely promotes the “politics of citizenship”, supporting programs and policies that “enabl[e] individuals to attain the social privileges associated with citizenship, if not citizenship itself” (p. 9). This can go hand-in-hand with undermining the refugees' connection to their homeland, leaving many suspicious of the motives behind it. Gabiam thus contends that these two different “politics” are essentially in conflict in the camps. With this framework she crystallizes themes previously discussed by fellow anthropologists Ilana Feldman and Julie Peteet.

Gabiam's second major contribution to the field is her detailed analysis of UNRWA, arguing that its ambivalent relationship with the Palestinians is grounded in the fact that UNRWA is “not a monolith [but] a hybrid characterized by the overlap of

the Western-dominated political order that oversaw its creation and the very Palestinian refugees it was created to assist” (p. 61). She uses UNRWA’s hybrid nature to explain its conflicting objectives, as it encompasses crisis, relief, and development tasks simultaneously in order to satisfy the multiple demands placed on it from all sides. Given the usually fleeting attention paid by scholars to UNRWA’s dynamics, this is especially valuable.

In focusing on a relatively small-scale UNRWA project, *The Politics of Suffering* takes an unusual approach to the well-worn genre of Palestinian refugee camp politics. This is typical of the series to which it belongs: Indiana University Press’s “Public Cultures of the Middle East and North Africa” seeks to produce non-traditional studies that re-frame understandings of the region. Despite this Gabiam’s work is still wedded to the conventional research question, “what is it that makes a place a camp?” (p. 2). In fact, her more interesting analyses emerge not from this conceptual frame but from her observations of quotidian life in the camps. For example, Gabiam’s descriptions of the refugees’ cumbersome trips from Ein el Tal to Aleppo to buy basic necessities effectively depicts the daily struggles of refugee life. This may be indicative of new research directions in the field, building on Diana Allan’s critique of the insufficient scholarly engagement with camp residents’ everyday concerns.

The relevance of Gabiam’s study extends beyond the Palestinian field and also encompasses development and refugee studies. For Palestine-focused scholars, its greatest value lies in how it illuminates Palestinian camp life in pre-war Syria, a host country that has often been overlooked in favor of Lebanon. Overall, this is a well-researched and well-written account of Palestinian life in Syria at what turned out to be a historically critical time. While Gabiam does not craft new insights or overturn key preconceptions, she effectively frames and articulates some of the underlying themes that have long been central to the situation of Palestinian refugees.

Anne Irfan is a PhD candidate in History at the London School of Economics. She is researching UNRWA’s historical role in the Palestinian refugee camps.